



EMBASSY  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

8 June 1966

Dear Secretary McNamara,

One of my main motivations in leaving John McNaughton's office to come to Vietnam last August was a feeling that a year of reading official cables from that country had not satisfied my "need to know" about the nature of the problems there. Too many events came--to me, and, it seemed, to others in the building--as surprises, too much behavior seemed puzzling and unmotivated, the reasons for our persistent failures and setbacks there seemed too uncertain. At the end of a year's work on Vietnam affairs I felt scarcely more educated on the situation than at the beginning. I took the chance to come to Vietnam with General Lansdale as, in large part, an opportunity to reduce that ignorance.

After only a few months I was fully convinced of what I had suspected before: that official reporting (including Nodis and Eyes Only, back-channel and what-have-you) is grossly inadequate to the job of educating high-level decision-makers to the nature of the essential problems here. It did not tell them what they needed to know. Nor did official, high-level visits to Vietnam (though somewhat better), in practice, fill that lack. Nor are there reports to be read in Saigon that answer the questions; to rely entirely on the official reporting to Saigon from the field (as many high officials in Saigon do) is to remain as untutored on many critical problems of Vietnam as I felt, and was, in Washington. There is simply no substitute for long, unhurried, private conversation with the regrettably small number of people with prolonged and broad experience in this country, or with counterinsurgency experience in other parts of Asia. It is much easier to find such people (and, of course, the much larger number of people who have had direct, frustrating but educational, working contact with the Vietnamese outside of Saigon) in Vietnam, both in Saigon and in the provinces, than anywhere else; and there is no better reason for coming to Vietnam for an education.

One moral is that official reporting and visits should be supplemented, in my opinion, by visits to Vietnam by precisely those trusted personal assistants who "can't possibly be spared for ten days," or other, relatively low-visibility representatives, not in the inspector-general role of checking on US performance but to seek out such knowledgeable persons and learn from them more of the nature of problems here. Another is that visits to the US of these persons should be fully exploited by arranging private seminars for the highest Washington policy-makers.

I have my own list of the people who have taught me the most here, which I would be glad to pass on (and I think you should be collecting nominations for such a list), but my immediate purpose in writing you is to bring to your attention that John Vann, who would be near the top of a great many lists here, is now in the States on visitation leave and will be in Washington available for consultation during that time.